

US election: Turning off TikTok is a big risk for the Democrats

March 22 2024, by Thomas Gift



Credit: Unsplash/CC0 Public Domain

Popular social media platform TikTok [stands accused](#) of holding US data in China, fostering censorship, and spreading disinformation. Its popularity poses a dilemma for US politicians, but especially Democrats who have heavily relied on the app to reach its core base of young voters.

Is it "[time up](#)" for TikTok in the US? And will it be the Democrats' own leader, President Joe Biden, who ultimately decides to close down the platform heading into the 2024 elections?

On March 13 the US House of Representatives [voted](#) 352 to 65 to order TikTok's parent company, Beijing-based [ByteDance](#), to sell the app (which is believed to have 150 million US users) or else face prohibition in the US over its alleged links to the Chinese Communist party.

The bill follows [reports](#) that TikTok's American executives are already exploring options for voluntarily splitting with ByteDance in a preemptive move to avoid regulatory scrutiny.

Although the bipartisan bill is by no means guaranteed to pass the Senate—where Democrat majority leader Chuck Schumer has [not committed](#) to bring it to a vote on the floor—Biden has said [he would sign the proposal](#) if it comes to his desk.

The campaign implications of this loom large. Many Democrats fear that banning TikTok in the lead-up to the election would be a self-inflicted political disaster, particularly when it comes to courting young voters.

One consultant [called](#) the Democrats "politically insane" for putting TikTok in jeopardy. And US commerce secretary Gina Raimondo [speculated](#) that blocking TikTok would lead to Democrats to "literally lose every voter under 35, forever".

The impact of losing even a few marginal percentage points of votes from the under 35 crowd matters.

Young voters were [pivotal](#) in elevating Biden to the White House in 2020. However, some [polling](#) shows Biden lagging behind former president Donald Trump among gen-Z and young millennials.

Investing in TikTok

In recent months, Democratic party operatives have not-so-quietly invested enormously into voter outreach on TikTok, in the hopes of shoring up the youth vote. The Biden campaign account, @BidenHQ, has more than [266,000 followers](#) and @thedemocrats has over [529,000](#).

The overwhelmingly young, progressive user base is likely to resent the government taking away their favorite app. A ban could also severely limit the Democratic party's ability to [connect with younger voters](#) through advertising and other forms of engagement.

The Biden campaign, the Democratic National Committee and Democrat-aligned groups have spent millions of dollars courting influencers who appear on TikTok and other [social media platforms](#) such as YouTube, Facebook and Instagram. Recently, the White House even hosted a star-studded gala for hundreds of would-be digital leaders.

Beyond Biden, many of the Democratic party's most visible rising stars—such as [Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez](#), who has more than 900,000 followers on TikTok—use the app to communicate with their constituents and fans. Similarly, US transportation secretary Pete Buttigieg [has made a name for himself](#) on TikTok for his viral take-down videos of Fox News hosts.

[Data from non-partisan organization Pew Research](#) shows that the

number of voters aged 18-29 who get their news from TikTok has jumped to 32%, a more than threefold increase since the 2020 election. Additionally, a [poll by NBC](#) found that young TikTok users skew Democrat over Republican by a margin of 47% to 30%.

Trump makes a U-turn

Biden's position on TikTok has not gone unremarked on by his rival, who's tried to exploit the controversy for political gain. In 2020, Trump proposed an executive order to outlaw the app in the US, which was [rejected](#) by a federal judge. But now the former president is [embracing it](#).

According to reports, that could be partially due the lobbying efforts of [influential Republican donor Jeff Yass](#), whose [investment firm](#) owns an [estimated 15% of ByteDance](#). Yet it's also likely to be due to Trump perceiving an opportunity to peel off young voters from Democrats.

"Frankly, there are a lot of people on TikTok that love it," Trump [declared](#) in a recent interview. "There are a lot of young kids on TikTok who will go crazy without it."

Even if Democrats have been more aggressive in leveraging TikTok, Republicans have made inroads in countering this appeal. This includes Trump [cosying up](#) to Libs of TikTok and the Babylon Bee, two popular pro-Trump social media influencers.

Election timing

A potential forced divestment of TikTok could land right in the heat of the 2024 election season. If Biden were to sign the legislation, ByteDance would be [granted six months to identify a purchaser](#). A ban

could be put in place as early as October of this year, with the election slated for November 5.

Democrats may be calculating that the odds of a sale not going through are low. For example, former US Treasury Secretary Steven Mnuchin has already [announced](#) that he's convening an investor group prepared to buy TikTok if it goes on the market.

Still, the mere act of putting at risk a platform that millions of [young voters](#) use for hours of every day can only have political downsides.

The closure of TikTok would boost demand for other social media platforms, as users search for substitutes. Trump, for example, has [lamented](#) that banning TikTok would "make Facebook bigger".

This would force Democrats to rethink their strategies, to build new followings, and to repackage their messaging for alternative apps. Yet divergent demographics of user bases would ensure that it wouldn't be a perfect, one-to-one transition.

For instance, according to the research firm [Insider Intelligence](#), roughly a quarter of Facebook users are between the ages of 18 to 34. On TikTok it's almost half.

Biden may well perceive that the national security threats posed by TikTok are too steep a price to accept its continuation as it is. But whether he will push ahead with closing down TikTok ahead of November is—like the election result—hard to call.

This article is republished from [The Conversation](#) under a Creative Commons license. Read the [original article](#).

Provided by The Conversation

Citation: US election: Turning off TikTok is a big risk for the Democrats (2024, March 22)
retrieved 27 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2024-03-election-tiktok-big-democrats.html>

This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.